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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003346

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: SULEYMANIYAH RIOT UNDERSCORES PUK,S
CHALLENGES

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Classified By: Classified By: RRT Erbil Acting Team Leader Dennis Wende
1 for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is an RRT Erbil cable.

12. (C) SUMMARY: A riot, unusual in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), recently broke out in the small town of Peramagron, Suleymaniyah Province, after the local mayor claimed in a television interview that his constituents were unaware of the benefits they were receiving from his administration. An initially peaceful demonstration in front of the City Hall turned violent after police and other authorities intervened. Anti-riot forces eventually arrived to restore order. PUK officials indirectly blamed the Goran ("Change") Movement for inciting the violence. The event underscores a widespread perception in the IKR that the PUK is not as proficient in providing services and fostering development as the KDP, leaving the PUK exposed to criticism by Goran and others. As competition between PUK and Goran sharpens in the run-up to March national elections, there may be more politically-related civil disturbances. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) Peramagron, a small town 32 km northwest of Suleymaniyah City, was built in the late 1980's as a relocation camp to receive Kurds who had been forced to leave their villages by Saddam's Ba'athist regime. The town has a few hundred houses, some schools, and various government facilities. Like many small towns in the region, unemployment is high, infrastructure and services leave something to be desired and young people have little to keep themselves occupied.

MAYOR'S REMARKS STRIKE A CHORD

14. (SBU) Awat Tawfiq, the municipality's PUK mayor, appeared on a television talk show on the evening of December 22. During his interview, he answered complaints from the public about the lack of development in the town by saying that the people of Peramagron were "blind" not to see the achievements of his administration and the many ongoing development projects he was overseeing. The next morning, several hundred locals gathered at the City Hall to demand the Mayor's apology and resignation. When local police and Assayesh intervened to control the demonstration, the situation quickly escalated, and the security forces were forced to withdraw. The crowd broke into the City Hall, causing some damage to the building. Two police vehicles were damaged and another was overturned and burned.

15. (C) The protestors then blocked two miles of the main highway between Erbil and Suleymaniyah City with burning tires, rocks, and debris. A U.S. Army element passing through the town estimated the crowd at approximately 100 core participants, mostly young, and over 1,000 casual participants. By the afternoon, Assayesh reinforcements and

anti-riot forces arrived from Suleymaniyah City and, toward the end of the day, were able to control the crowd. Peshmerga forces were also alerted, but were not deployed. A well-informed contact indicated that KRG PM Barham Salih personally ordered that Peshmerga forces not enter the town. Four demonstrators were injured, one of whom was reported as being in critical but stable condition. There are unconfirmed reports that Assayesh elements arrested 5-10 people for their participation in the riot.

MAYOR CLAIMS HE WAS MISUNDERSTOOD, IMPLIES GORAN TO BLAME

¶16. (C) The mayor issued a public apology, saying his televised comments were misinterpreted and that he had not intended to insult his constituents. In a remark widely understood by contacts to implicate Goran supporters, the Mayor implied that "certain individuals" had tried to distort the truth about his record of performance in office to cause trouble. Several contacts noted that it was widely understood that the Mayor was clearly referring to Goran supporters. End note.) A PUK representative has stated that PM Barham will personally investigate the townspeople's complaints.

¶17. (C) COMMENT: Civil disturbances have been rare in the Kurdistan Region, so a full-fledged riot such as occurred in Peramagron is big news for the region. The PUK is seen by many as not being as efficient in providing services and fostering infrastructure development as the KDP, and charges of corruption against PUK leaders are resonating with the populace. It is not yet clear whether Goran actually had a hand in instigating the demonstration, but it nonetheless stands to benefit politically from unrest in the PUK's heartland. As the competition between PUK and Goran sharpens in the run-up to national elections in March, particularly in the traditional PUK strongholds of Suleymaniyah and Kirkuk,

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there may be more politically-related civil disturbances in the offing. The PUK's perceived failure to provide municipal services and deliver on development promises is emerging as a cudgel with which Goran seeks to bludgeon the PUK. Reftel provides details on recent protests in Kirkuk, where demonstrators (whom some claim were organized by Goran) demanded better municipal services and subsequently undertook an apparently orchestrated campaign to petition the PUK office en masse. End comment.

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